



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT SOMERSET LEVELS & FOREST OF DEAN

4TH JUNE – 8TH JUNE 2018

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MONDAY 4th June 2018 – *Overcast, humid, fairly warm*

Following our 14:00 check in at The Speech House Hotel – situated in the heart of the Forest of Dean – we drove the short distance to New Fancy View, where the remnants of old colliery workings afford a splendid vista over a large part of the forest. We were soon onto several Common Buzzards, but even better a male Goshawk was located distantly to the north. After briefly being harried by a Carrion Crow, the bird circled while gaining height, before drifting almost directly overhead. A Hawfinch shot past close by, with European Robin, Blackcap, Common Chiffchaff, Dunnock, Common Raven, Song Thrush, Goldfinch and Eurasian Siskin added. A Common Lizard was a good spot by one of the group.

After an hour or so, we headed off to Cannop Ponds, two pools created in 1925 to supply Parkend Ironworks. A Goldcrest sang high in a tree at our parking spot and an unusually confiding Common Raven was by the small bridge. The site is well known for its population of Mandarin Ducks and plenty were quickly located, including a female with downy young on the stream, where a family of Grey Wagtails was also present. Additional waterbirds at the ponds were Mute Swan, Greylag Goose, Tufted Duck, Common Moorhen and Common Coot. Small numbers of Barn Swallows and House Martins fed over the water and a Common Swift zipped through. Making our way along the path towards the southern end, we noted various woodland birds, including Mistle Thrush, Long-tailed Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit, Blackcap and Garden Warbler. The feeders by the stoneworks were alive with birds, affording good views of Great Spotted Woodpecker, Common Nuthatch, various tits and several Eurasian Siskins. Our first Pied Wagtail appeared and a family of Grey Wagtails frequented the stream, where a Dipper showed really well.

Arriving back at The Speech House in good time for dinner, we enjoyed watching House Martins busily building nests on the hotel buildings, plus Greenfinches and Goldfinches singing by the car park. Following dinner, taken in the historic Verderers' Court Room, an excursion was made to a nearby area of recent forest clearfell, where heath-like habitat had subsequently arisen. Even at a distance of several hundred yards from the opening we could hear the churring of a European Nightjar, even though the sun was only just setting. A little further along the path a Tree Pipit flew into a bush to roost and a Common Stonechat called. Once at the clearing we obtained great views of European Nightjars, with three or four males churring and several females chasing around, all in quite reasonable light, unusually! We were also lucky to observe a number of roding Eurasian Woodcocks, flying low over making their rather unearthly calls. With the light fading, we headed back to base, ending an enjoyable first day in the forest.

TUESDAY 5TH June 2018 – *Damp, cool start, some sun later in the day*

Our first destination was to be RSPB Nagshead, a lovely oak woodland reserve in the south-west of the Forest of Dean. Our first find of note was a pair of Spotted Flycatchers near the Campbell Hide. Taking the short trail, we were soon encountering typical woodland birds, such as Eurasian Jay, Common Treecreeper, Common Nuthatch, Mistle Thrush, Song Thrush and Wren. We didn't locate our first Pied Flycatchers until the return leg of the trail, with a pair feeding young at a nest box. Both were mostly foraging on the ground, presumably as a result of aerial insects being hard to come by in the rather cool and dank conditions. Two more Pied Flycatchers were subsequently found between here and the car park. The track to the lower hide brought us Garden Warbler, Blackcap (both

commonly encountered throughout the trip, but heard far more than seen) and Common Chiffchaff. The immediate vicinity of the hide was fairly quiet, although we did hear a rather distant Common Redstart from here, albeit in an area without access.

Following a comfort break at the hotel, we parked up near Woorgreens Lake, where we enjoyed a short circular walk via the lake and Great Kensley Inclosure. Several Common Swifts were feeding over the lake, where Tufted Ducks made up most of the wildfowl. Lunch was taken just across the road at Cyril Hart Arboretum, where some convenient benches enabled us to watch the antics at some busy bird feeders, with Stock Dove, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Common Nuthatch among the clients.



Stock Dove

A short drive east of here is Yew Tree Brake, an area dominated by conifers and clearfell. On emerging into the opening, several singing Tree Pipits were heard and we soon had some excellent views of their exuberant parachuting display flights. Approximately 30 Common Crossbills flew across the clearing and landed in the Norway Spruce and we were able to gain excellent telescope views of a couple of these characterful birds.

Our final destination of the day was to be Symonds Yat Rock, where a viewpoint overlooks a spectacular cliff face, past which the River Wye snakes. On arrival we quickly located a Peregrine circling over the cliffs. A nesting pair use this site annually to nest, although the volunteer present informed us that there was uncertainty as to whether the pair had hatched young, and that the bird we had been watching could possibly be an intruder attempting to usurp the residents. Scanning from this fabulously scenic place revealed Common Buzzard, Common Raven, Eurasian Jackdaw,

Stock Dove, Lesser Black-backed Gull and Great Cormorant. A single Sand Martin was found among the House Martins and several Common Pheasants roamed the fields.



Symonds Yat

On arriving back at the hotel, we had a little spare time before dinner and took a walk from there along the Spruce Ride and back via the arboretum. The highlight among a selection of woodland birds was a male Pied Flycatcher at the junction of the ride and arboretum.

WEDNESDAY 6TH June 2018 – *Sunny and fairly warm*

Today we were to transfer to the Meare Manor, our base in the Somerset Levels, via a visit RSPB Newport Wetlands, situated on the Gwent Levels. Leaving the Speech House after breakfast we headed for Monmouth and then took the A449 south towards Newport. Stopping briefly for a comfort break at the impressive visitor centre, we noted Reed Warbler and a family of Little Grebes, while a friend (and RSPB employee) kindly pointed out a group of Bee Orchids.

A short drive from here (and noting a Common Kestrel on the way) is another part of this extensive reserve at Goldcliff Lagoons, where a series of shallow scrapes of varying salinity are overlooked by a number of hides. Here we were greeted by the explosive song of Cetti's Warbler from a nearby reed (as the ditches here are called), with Common Swifts much in evidence. Stopping at the first blind we quickly added a range of waders – Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Little Ringed Plover (with young), Common Redshank, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Northern Lapwing and Black-tailed Godwit – with wildfowl comprising Mute Swan, Greylag Goose, Canada Goose, Common Shelduck, Gadwall, Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Common Pochard and Tufted Duck. Our first Little Egrets of the trip flew past, with Great Cormorant, Grey Heron and Black-headed Gull also logged. Passerines included Lesser Whitethroat, Common Whitethroat, Linnet, Reed Bunting, Reed Warbler and Sky Lark. Walking to the eastern end of the lagoons we finally caught up with Pied Avocets, with around 35 present, including a few juveniles. Climbing the sea wall gave us views over the

estuary, where we added two Whimbrel, with two Black Swans appearing rather incongruous here. Following lunch by the vehicle in the now warming sunshine, we headed towards Somerset, checking in at Meare Manor about 70 minutes later.

After depositing our luggage we were soon heading off for the short drive to the superb reserve of Ham Wall RSPB, where we would spend the remainder of the afternoon. We wouldn't have time on this occasion to cover the whole complex, so opted to walk the Ham Wall Loop, a scenic 1.7 mile circular walk, which takes in the Avalon hide. Heading east along the main path we soon heard our first booming Great Bittern, with several Great White Egrets from the first platform. Marsh Harriers seemed to be constantly in view, frequently spooking the Northern Lapwings and waterbirds, which included Great Crested Grebe, Gadwall Common Pochard. Even at this time of day the trackside bushes were alive with warbler song, most numerous Blackcap, Garden Warbler and Cetti's Warbler. Four-spotted Chasers were the commonest representative of the Odonata, with Hairy Dragonfly, Red-eyed Damselfly and Variable Damselfly the pick of the rest. Our first two Eurasian Hobbies were noted, taking advantage of the bountiful aerial insects in the warm afternoon sun. We spent some time in the spacious Avalon hide, which afforded excellent views of Great White Egrets and Marsh Harriers, while more Great Bitterns boomed unseen.



Great White Egret

Following dinner, we decided to make a late evening visit to Shapwick Heath, taking advantage of the fair weather and long daylight hours. The scrape held a variety of wildfowl, most notably a drake Garganey, with yet more Marsh Harriers, Great White Egrets and

booming Great Bitterns, all very atmospheric with the sun behind the scrape. As we headed back to the vehicle we reflected on a good day's birding, but aware that we had somehow not yet actually seen any Great Bitterns, something we intended to remedy the next day...

THURSDAY 7th June 2018 – *Cloudy, humid, becoming warm*

Today we would be spending all our time visiting a number of reserves on the Levels. Just to the north of the hotel is Westhay Moor NNR, a network of open water, reedbed and the largest surviving fragment of lowland acidic mire in the south-west. Birds seen from the first hide included Common Cuckoo, Marsh Harrier, Common Teal, Reed Warbler and Reed Bunting. At the tower hide we were thrilled to experience several close sightings of an Otter, while a Great Bittern made a short flight over the reeds and others boomed. Water Rails called and brief views of Cetti's Warblers were possible. A little further on a Great Bittern gave us an extended flypast, finally allowing all the group to get good views of this iconic species.



Great Bittern

Our next site would be Catcott Lows. Formerly arable land, Catcott is one of the lowest points in the Brue Valley and has been converted to grazing marsh. The water levels are carefully controlled, so that cattle grazing is possible in the summer. It was around these cattle that we were fortunate to find at least four Cattle Egrets, a species which seems to be well on the way to becoming properly established in the UK. A Great White Egret flew in and Marsh Harriers were seen distantly. The height of the vegetation obscured much of the ground, but it was obvious that Common Redshank and Northern Lapwing were present in numbers.

Lunch was taken in the car park at Greylake RSPB. This site is another area of wet grazing meadows, just over the other side of the Polden Hills from the Avalon Marshes, in the north-west corner of King's Sedgemoor. Some Common Redshank and Northern Lapwing were much in evidence in a field near the car park, responding noisily to a passing Marsh Harrier. A Eurasian Curlew called unseen from fields across the road. From the car park the access route to the hides passes an area of reeds and ditches, before arriving at a couple of hides. Viewing here was somewhat hindered by the luxuriant vegetation, but we did see a Great Bittern fly in and land out of view by a ditch, Common Cuckoos called, a Eurasian Sparrowhawk flew through and Marsh Harriers were frequent. A Common Treecreeper was by the hides and a particularly showy Cetti's Warbler was observed. On our way back we

returned via the reedbed loop (carefully negotiating safe passage past a hissing pair of Mute Swans with cygnets), which proved a good decision when two Great Bitterns gave repeated close flypasts.



Little Grebes

Our final port of call for the day would be to Shapwick Heath, where we would walk as far as Noah's Lake. On the way out we obtained good telescope views of a Eurasian Hobby and a Common Cuckoo perched up in close proximity to each other, near the scrape. The drake Garganey was still present on the scrape itself, where a few Common Teal and six Northern Shovelers were also noted. At Noah's lake we walked as far as the new hides. At least two hundred Common Swifts were feeding, plus several Hobbies, Great White Egrets and Little Egrets. A distant raptor proved to be a Red Kite and yet another flying Great Bittern was logged.

FRIDAY 8th June – *Overcast, light winds*

The majority of our final morning would be spent at Ham Wall. Our intention was to explore the Walton Heath section of the reserve, where we didn't previously visit. On our way out we made several Great Bittern sightings, before arriving at the Tor View hide. This is a fabulous place to get close views of Great Bitterns and Great White Egrets, with several of each seen. A Common Tern dropped in and Common Cuckoos called. Taking the trail around the marsh we were stunned by the numbers of Four-spotted Chasers. Clouds were arising from the trackside vegetation, surely thousands of individuals in total.

By now it was approaching midday and we needed to make tracks for Newport, where two of the group would be catching a train. However, the dreaded Friday motorway traffic wasn't too bad, giving us enough time for a short stop at Newport Wetlands. Walking out towards

the lighthouse a Marsh Harrier was seen and a Great Bittern gave a flypast - we had certainly been spoiled with both of these on the tour! Near the lighthouse itself were pleased to hear and then catch sight of one, possibly two, Bearded Tits, our final new species of the trip.



Great White Egret

SYSTEMATIC LIST

- 1 Little Grebe
- 2 Great Crested Grebe
- 3 Great Cormorant
- 4 Grey Heron
- 5 Cattle Egret
- 6 Little Egret
- 7 Great White Egret
- 8 Great Bittern
- 9 Mute Swan
- 10 Greylag Goose
- 11 Canada Goose
- 12 Common Shelduck
- 13 Eurasian Wigeon
- 14 Garganey
- 15 Gadwall
- 16 Common Teal
- 17 Mallard
- 18 Northern Shoveler
- 19 Common Pochard

20 Tufted Duck
21 Red Kite
22 Marsh Harrier
23 Eurasian Sparrowhawk
24 Northern Goshawk
25 Common Buzzard
26 Common Kestrel
27 Eurasian Hobby
28 Peregrine
29 Common Pheasant
30 Water Rail [H]
31 Common Coot
32 Common Moorhen
33 Pied Avocet
34 Eurasian Oystercatcher
35 Northern Lapwing
36 Little Ringed Plover
37 Ringed Plover
38 Black-tailed Godwit
39 Eurasian Curlew [H]
40 Whimbrel
41 Eurasian Woodcock
42 Common Redshank
43 Dunlin
44 Herring Gull
45 Lesser Black-backed Gull
46 Black-headed Gull
47 Common Tern
48 Stock Dove
49 Wood Pigeon
50 Collared Dove
51 Common Cuckoo
52 European Nightjar
53 Great Spotted Woodpecker
54 Sky Lark
55 Pied Wagtail
56 Grey Wagtail
57 Dipper
58 Tree Pipit
59 Common Swift
60 Barn Swallow
61 House Martin
62 Sand Martin
63 Wren
64 Dunnock
65 European Robin
66 Blackbird
67 Mistle Thrush
68 Song Thrush
69 Common Stonechat
70 Common Redstart [H]
71 Pied Flycatcher
72 Spotted Flycatcher
73 Common Chiffchaff
74 Willow Warbler

75 Cetti's Warbler
76 Reed Warbler
77 Blackcap
78 Common Whitethroat
79 Lesser Whitethroat
80 Garden Warbler
81 Goldcrest
82 Bearded Tit
83 Long-tailed Tit
84 Blue Tit
85 Great Tit
86 Coal Tit
87 Common Nuthatch
88 Common Treecreeper
89 Eurasian Jay
90 Black-billed Magpie
91 Eurasian Jackdaw
92 Carrion Crow
93 Rook
94 Common Raven
95 Common Starling
96 House Sparrow
97 Chaffinch
98 Greenfinch
99 Eurasian Siskin
100 Goldfinch
101 Linnet
102 Bullfinch
103 Hawfinch
104 Common Crossbill
105 Reed Bunting

OTHER WILDLIFE

Odonata

Banded Demoiselle
Large Red Damselfly
Azure Damselfly
Variable Damselfly
Common Blue Damselfly
Blue-tailed Damselfly
Red-eyed Damselfly
Emperor Dragonfly
Hairy Dragonfly
Broad-bodied Chaser
Four-spotted Chaser
Black-tailed Skimmer

Lepidoptera

Cream-spot Tiger
Cinnabar
Silver Y
Large White
Green-veined White
Red Admiral

Speckled Wood
Meadow Brown
Small Copper
Brown Argus
Common Blue

Other Notable Fauna

Otter
Weasel
Fallow Deer
Bank Vole
Common Lizard